



## Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

## A PARTIAL SUBSTITUTE FOR THE THEME

---

MARTHA HALE SHACKFORD  
Wellesley College

---

Dare one ask, in these days of assiduous cultivation of the theme, if we are not becoming too superstitious about its values? It is not an infrequent experience to hear a pupil's proficiency in English composition expressed, not by an opinion as to his mental qualifications, but rather by the commercial statement that he has written, during four years, one hundred and thirty-six short themes and thirty-two long themes. Are we to believe that the mere number of themes written is convincing proof of the pupil's skill as a writer? Has all this energy of pupil and of teacher been wisely expended? No one would question the value of the theme employed moderately as an exercise, but when the ideal becomes quantity rather than quality, danger threatens.

Before discussing the case of the pupil, let us consider that of the teacher who has to read several hundred themes each year. Under the conditions that now exist in most of our secondary schools, it is impossible for a teacher to give adequate criticism on every theme she reads. Her splendid devotion is physically unable to accomplish the task which is assigned to her. When we insist that a teacher shall read and correct day after day themes which can offer her only the minimum of intellectual challenge, we are deliberately pursuing a course which encourages the deadening of literary sensibilities and the gradual destruction of the teacher's powers of perception. Teachers of English must be intellectually alert, full of spirit and enthusiasm, quick to discriminate between excellence and inferiority, and they must have that magnetic fund of faith in their pupils which will enable them to lead the shy, the discouraged, even the sullen, young folk triumphantly through the required training. Can a person who is forever reading commonplace, mechanical themes keep individual freshness, energy, and high standards? Will she not pass over

mistakes in spelling and grammar, will she not be satisfied with perfunctory work, simply because she has grown so used to these things in myriad themes that they no longer rouse her to active protest? The teacher needs to be relieved of some of the burden of reading themes, and she needs the stimulus of constant association with the masters of expression, if she is to train our boys and girls in logical thinking and in discriminating choice of words and phrases.

The situation of the pupil is as unfortunate as that of the instructor, especially if that pupil is just beginning his work in the secondary school. He finds himself required to write a theme every week, a short theme, to be sure, but still something original. There may be little paragons who enjoy the exercise, but the writing of themes is not one of the healthy impulses of normal youth. Such work is done under protest, even when teachers and subjects are most inspiring. A boy may give spontaneous oral description of "How I Went Fishing," but when he is called upon to write an account he recoils, and, becoming stiff and conventional, accomplishes a piece of writing as animated as his fishing-rod. The young person of thirteen or fourteen has no desire to write; he has no illusion of an audience interested in his opinions and observations. Compelled to composition, he grows self-conscious; his natural faculty of expression seems to be partially paralyzed, and if by good luck he blunders upon a suggestive word or a happy form of sentence, he tenaciously clings to it, repeating it not only in one theme but in many. If the teacher cannot make a careful study of each pupil's work, the pupil acquires mannerisms, employs incorrect forms, becomes habituated to certain unfortunate and even wrong ways of writing. Custom hangs upon him, as it does upon anyone who lacks initiative, and who finds scant pleasure in his employment.

Of course, the primary significance of theme writing lies in the fact that the individual boy or girl is taught independence, is given personal responsibility. The opportunity to make trial of one's powers is the most essential part of development. The pupil who does not have to write themes never gains self-possession in the world of letters. It is an absolutely indispensable part of

the education of young people that they shall learn to express themselves, overcoming stammering and awkwardness in speech as well as in writing. It would be disaster if there were no exercise of the powers of expression, if our young people were freed from the beneficent but tyrannical theme. The greatest difficulty which the pupil has to overcome, as he is led on his way to observation, reflection, narration, description, and exposition, is the difficulty which lies in the fact that he is compelled to make something concrete out of his inner world, when he lacks concrete material. It is a case of too much straw but no clay. What vocabulary have these boys of thirteen; how many adjectives do they use; what is their skill in verbs; do they not believe that *and* and *but* are the only connectives; do they not begin sentences instinctively with *the* or *it*? If boys had the means of expression they would not suffer so keenly from awkward shame over their compositions. They would not feel tongue-tied, chained, and hobbled as they do so often. We give them the minimum of suggestion regarding the basic materials of writing, yet expect them by some occult means to show continued advance in their themes. It is said that young robins who are learning to fly eat twelve feet of worms in twelve hours. Let us begin to think a little more about the food and a little less about the wings of our pupils. Let us ask that for every three themes composed by the pupil there be one piece of writing which shall be a mere slavish copy of a model.

A return to the Dark Ages may seem to be suggested by this method, but mechanical as it appears, the exercise in copying good English will result in immediate benefit to the pupil. Free from the demand for "originality," "enthusiasm," and "imagination," a boy can proceed to work without self-consciousness, yet gain the needed practice in the art of composition. Cheerfulness, a sense of security and, let us hope, a certain amount of curiosity will animate the copyist. Writing with absolute regard for a perfect reproduction of the original, a boy must note spelling and punctuation, whether he wishes to or not. Less emphatic will be his scrutiny of grammar, diction, and style, but if he is urged to consider these things, if he is made to record at the foot of his copy (1) all the new words he has noted, (2) the different ways of

beginning the sentences, (3) the connectives used in compound and in complex sentences, he will be obliged to think a little about what he is copying, and definite impressions will be made upon him. To follow with utmost precision the sentences of a competent writer, to meet his words and phrases and idioms, gives a boy intimate acquaintance with the manner of good writers.

Is it not our first principle in teaching children to write to give them a good model, and do we not all remember how much help it was to trace the letters which we could not at first form for ourselves? The habit of tracing maps of some country has been found a very successful way of establishing permanent acquaintance with geographical outlines. The wood carver must begin by following exact patterns before he becomes independent, and young artists are taught to copy with utmost faithfulness the work of old masters, until their technical skill is established and they are ready for self-expression. Is it not true that this method of literal imitation of successful writers will fix upon a pupil's mind certain principles and methods which he will gain more quickly and thoroughly than he does by the straining effort of always attempting original creation? Mere reading of good authors does not imprint precise details of composition upon the mind; there must be close work over them, exact reproduction. By requiring every pupil to make two copies of a certain extract, also by expecting him to read and verify the copies made by one of his classmates, we may feel sure essential matters could be brought to his attention. If the members of a class were made responsible for the verification of all these extracts it would relieve the teacher for one week of a heavy burden of reading and would give her the opportunity for closer study of the individual pupil's work. It may be objected that this mechanical exercise will be profoundly distasteful to pupils, but this compassionate observation does not deserve much consideration. We are becoming far too sensitive about the enjoyments of our pupils, we entertain them overmuch, we smooth out difficulties, and we deprive them of the character values as well as of the purely rational values gained from steady application to a task monotonous, difficult, but formative. The complaint is frequently urged against college students that they

lack power of sustained devotion to a hard task; they expect to be released from intellectual work as soon as their curiosity and enthusiasm are a bit jaded. Easy-going parents, considerate teachers, are robbing our young people of the hardships of scholarly work, thereby endangering the stability and power of endurance of the nation.

The subjects assigned for such exercises must, of course, be chosen with due regard for the interests and intelligence of young people. Every good rhetoric contains examples which may profitably be utilized for this task, but still more satisfactory would be passages chosen from the required reading. *Ivanhoe*, *Treasure Island*, *The Sketch Book*, *Walden*, *Travels with a Donkey*, *The Life of Johnson*, or the *Essay on Burns* are in the hands of classes, and would lend themselves admirably to this device of familiarizing pupils with the very words and phrases and sentences of the masters. Variety must be sought, so that at the end of a year a pupil will have come into intimate relationship with a score or more of successful writers. In this way he will escape mannerisms and too much dependence upon the author's style. If passages which have been discussed in class were chosen, it would be a means of impressing upon pupils the substance as well as the form of the text. When a class has become familiar with the general style of any writer, the exercise of analyzing that style in minute detail will deepen the acquaintance, and will give decided stimulus to the copyists' own manner of composition.

There has been a great deal said in the past about the value of trying to devise imitations of the style of great writers. Stevenson's often-quoted account of the way in which he tried now one style, now another, has stimulated many an ambitious young writer to imitate him. Cardinal Newman, too, recounts his practice: "For myself, when I was fourteen or fifteen, I imitated Addison; when I was seventeen, I wrote in the style of Johnson; about the same time I fell in with the twelfth volume of Gibbon, and my ears rang with the cadence of his sentences, and I dreamed of it for a night or two." This is all very well for aspirants toward success in the world of letters, but for the ordinary pupil it would be most undesirable. Teachers have been known to send young

pupils home with the command to write a paper in the style of Addison. That is worse, even, than being told to write a theme which will reveal "personality." The ingenuity required for combining new ideas with an old style is something that the ordinary boy does not possess. Let him copy the masters *verbatim et literatim*, and have all the help that comes from close, precise, unimaginative following in the very footsteps of the great. We do not want him to be a brilliant, clever mimic, but a sober, precise workman, who, having learned accuracy and perseverance, has become somewhat familiar with the mechanics of effective writing. Copying an extract from a master's hand is the next best thing to writing it oneself.